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ABSTRACT

This study explored the similarities and differences in professional attitudes toward intervention in incest cases. The sample consisted of 35 men and women employed at one of the following: a counseling agency, child protective services, sheriff's department, and police department in a Southwest community. Demographic data were collected, including age, sex, marital status, parental status, education, and number of child sexual abuse cases encountered. Subjects responded to each of four case vignettes, three of which involved specific cases of father-daughter or stepfather-daughter incest and one that asked subjects to respond to incest in general. Subjects responded by answering 10 intervention statements on a Likert-type scale. The results showed significant differences in attitudes regarding mental health therapy as an intervention and in attitudes regarding the father as mentally disturbed versus a criminal. Sheriff detectives were found to be the most punitive of all groups; sheriff and police detectives were more apt to view the offender as a criminal rather than mentally disturbed. Counselors and child protective services workers agreed more strongly than did police and sheriff detectives on mental health therapy for the father, daughter, and family. (Author/NB)

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Intervention in Child Sexual Abuse: An Analysis of Professional Attitudes

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Abstract

This study explored the similarities and differences in professional attitudes towards intervention in incest cases. The sample consisted of 35 men and women employed at one of the following: a counseling agency, child protective services, sheriff's department, and police department in a Southwest community. Demographic data were collected, including age, sex, marital status, parental status, education, and number of child sexual abuse cases encountered. Results showed significant differences in attitudes regarding mental health therapy as intervention and in attitudes regarding the father as mentally disturbed versus a criminal.

Introduction

Child sexual abuse is a serious crime which often results in physical and emotional damage to the victims (Finkelhor, 1979). Currently, the annually reported cases of child sexual abuse for children under 18 years of age are in the 150,000 to 200,000 range (Schetkey & Green, 1988). Glaser and Frosh (1988) believe the figures "grossly underestimate" the true frequency of child sexual abuse since children often feel afraid or guilty and do not tell about their abuse.

One form of sexual abuse is incest. According to VanderMey and Neff (1986), incest was not perceived as a severe form of child abuse or a social problem until the mid 1970s. Of all child sexual abuse, incest accounts for one half of the female victims and one fifth of the male victims (Finkelhor, 1979).

Professional interest in child sexual abuse and need for services has reached an all time high (Conte & Berliner, 1988). This has prompted the development of specialized counseling agencies, child protective services, and sex crime units within law enforcement departments. Professionals in these groups are

responsible for "the initial decision making stages in investigation and for judgments that affect the disposition of cases" (Wilk & McCarthy, 1986, p. 20). According to Glaser and Frosh (1988), many professionals have private inhibitions when faced with disturbing sexual details, doubts of truthfulness about the account of the abuse, conflicting loyalty between the child and the abuser, feelings of anger, and an uncertainty about what constitutes acceptable touch. These personal feelings and uncertainties are evident among professionals at the level of both policy and practice.

The literature on child sexual abuse provides information on treatment intervention (Salter, 1988), evaluation (Schetky & Green, 1988), and process of validation (Glaser & Frosh, 1988). However, little has been done in researching professional attitudes toward the issues of child sexual abuse. Wilk and McCarthy (1986) provided one of the first studies which measured professional attitudes toward intervention in these sexual abuse cases.

The area under investigation in this study was the attitudes of professionals who work with child sexual

abuse victims. Specifically, were the attitudes of professionals employed at a counseling agency, child protective services, sheriff's department, and police department similar or different regarding intervention in child sexual abuse cases involving father/daughter or stepfather/daughter incest?

Methods

Population

The population for this study consisted of men and women representing four professional groups who worked with child sexual abuse victims in a Southwest community: counselors, child protective service workers, sheriff detectives, and police detectives. The total population identified was n = 35.

Instrument

The questionnaire used in this study was designed by Wilk and McCarthy for their 1986 study to measure the attitudes of professionals toward intervention in incest cases. The questionnaire consisted of 4 pages. Page 1 requested demographic data including age, sex, marital status, parental status, education level, and approximate number of child sexual assault cases encountered through employment. Pages 2 through 4

contained the following case vignettes taken from the Handbook of Clinical Intervention into Child Sexual Abuse (Sgroi, 1982).

Case 1 involved a 14 year old who reported being close to her father but not her mother; her father had sexually molested her since age 11, including vaginal intercourse at age 13; she told a school teacher, but is sad and feels she's lost her "best friend."

Case 2 described an 11 year old, the second oldest of 5 who had no friends and assumed the role of housekeeper, parent for her siblings, and wife and lover for her stepfather; her mother slapped her daughter when dissatisfied with her work. Case 3 depicted a 15 year old who had vaginal intercourse with her father, beginning at age 11; he traded bedrooms with her younger sister, who was then also molested by their father; their mother reported the abuse of the younger sister; the 15 year old was angry about the disclosure as the family is now in a shelter for safety.

Case 4 asked the professionals to respond to incest in general in order to determine if their

attitudes were case related or were generalized to most incest cases.

Professionals were asked to respond to each case vignette by answering 10 intervention statements on a Likert type scale, with 1 = "meaning definitely do not agree" and 4 = "definitely agree".

The intervention statements were:

1. The family can be helped by mental health therapy without court intervention.
2. The father should be arrested.
3. The court should remove the daughter from the home, but not the father.
4. The father could be helped by court-ordered mental health counseling.
5. If the father is removed from the home, the daughter should have mental health therapy and stay with the mother.
6. The father is a mentally disturbed person, not a criminal.
7. The father should serve a jail sentence.
8. The daughter is as guilty as the father.
9. The mother should be arrested.

10. Court-ordered mental health therapy can help this family.

The questionnaires were distributed to the supervisors in each professional setting. Supervisors then asked for volunteers to complete the questionnaire. Completed questionnaires were gathered and returned to the researcher.

Results

The population for this study consisted of men and women representing four professional groups: counselors, child protective service workers, sheriff detectives, and police detectives who have worked with child sexual abuse victims in a Southwest community. The total population (N = 35) responded to the questionnaire for a 100 percent response rate. Most of the respondents were between the ages of 26-40, married, had completed a bachelor's degree, and encountered more than 100 child sexual abuse cases (Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

Differences in degree requirements and training were reported on the questionnaire by supervisors at the four work settings. The police department reported that training was mandatory after a detective became a member of the sex crimes unit, with a minimum of 40 training hours. Additional or continued training was mandatory. The agency from which the counselors were obtained reported an educational requirement of a master's degree; no additional training was mandatory. Child protective services required a bachelors degree and mandatory training of 1 to 2 sessions, comprised of 2 to 4 hours. It was also reported that the supervisor provided on-the-job training. The sheriff's department reported that no training was required.

All respondents' scores were combined by group setting to obtain aggregated results. A Kruskal-Wallis One-Way Analysis of Variance was performed to check for significant differences between the four professional settings.

A statistically significant difference, at the .05 level, was found in the following cases: Case 1 intervention statements 4, 6, and 7; Case 2 statements

4, 6, and 9; Case 3 statements 4, 5, 6, and 9; and Case 4 statements 1, 4, 6, 7, and 9. In all four cases, there was a statistically significant difference at the .05 level for intervention statements 4 and 6 (Table 2).

Intervention 4 stated the father could be helped by court-ordered mental health counseling and intervention 6 stated the father was mentally disturbed, not a criminal. In all four cases, counselors and child protective service workers were more in agreement with these strategies, while the sheriff and police department agreed that the mother should be arrested.

Insert Table 2 about here

Case 4 asked professionals to respond to incest "in general". Results confirm that professional attitudes, overall, stay relatively consistent regarding intervention strategies in incest cases, rather than being case specific.

The strongest attitude shared by all 4 groups was on question 8, agreement that the daughter (victim) was

not guilty. The sheriff's detectives in all three cases with a total of 30 answers, had the highest or lowest mean rank on 20 out of the 30 possible intervention statements. Of the 10 remaining statements, the sheriff's detectives tied with police detectives for highest or lowest score on 5 (Table 2). This seems to indicate the sheriff's department views intervention in "black and white" terms -- not as much "case specific" differences as the other groups.

Discussion

Little information exists about professional attitudes toward intervention in child sexual abuse cases. The need for this information is increasing as reported child sexual abuse cases increase. Professionals are aware of the importance of networking and teamwork among various law enforcement and mental health agencies in the community dealing with this problem.

Counselors, child protective service workers, sheriff's detectives and police detectives have different attitudes about appropriate intervention in incest cases. Sheriff's detectives were found to be the most punitive of all 4 groups. Sheriff's and

police detectives were more apt to view the offender as a criminal rather than mentally disturbed. Counselors and child protective services agree more strongly than do police and sheriff detectives on mental health therapy for the father, daughter, and the family.

Although caution must be exercised in generalizing beyond this sample, the results suggest that several implications be considered. Data indicate that counselors and child protective service workers were more in agreement about therapy, both for the offender (father) and the family. Sheriff's detectives do not agree as strongly with therapy as they do with arrest and jail sentence for the offender. Police detectives were more in agreement with the sheriff's detectives but their attitudes were not as punitive.

In order for counselors to provide the incest victim and the family with the best services, an understanding of all professional settings involved is necessary in order for teamwork to occur. Without teamwork, the victim suffers from "crimes" of the system: lack of cooperation between professional settings; having to tell their story over and over; and differences in policies, which causes confusion.

Teamwork also benefits professionals by providing a supportive network.

To become a team, it is suggested that team representatives meet on a regular basis to discuss modes of operation, new information in the field, and ways of incorporating and practicing cooperative effects among professional settings. Continued education and training is also recommended in the form of workshops and classes.

"We in the field of child sexual abuse have reached a critical juncture and the future holds promise of increased knowledge for all disciplines and ultimately of improved help for children and families" (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 1986, p. 33).

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Table 1. Total sample (N = 35) demographic data distribution and percentage (Sheriff n = 9, Child Protective workers n = 9, Police n = 8, Counselors n = 9).

Item	Number of Responses	Frequency (%)
Age		
26-40	29	82.9
41-55	4	11.4
56 or older	2	5.7
Sex		
Male	19	54.3
Female	16	45.7
Marital Status		
Never married	10	28.6
Married	19	54.3
Separated	1	2.9
Divorced	4	11.4
Widowed	1	2.9
Parental Status		
Parent	17	48.6
Step-parent	5	14.3
Not a parent	15	42.9
Education		
High school	0	0
Some college	14	40.0
Bachelor's degree	8	22.9
Master's degree	12	34.3
J.D. or Ph.D. degree	1	2.9
Approximate cases encountered		
19-20	1	2.9
20-30	2	5.7
30-40	2	5.7
40-50	4	11.4
50-60	4	11.4
70-80	2	5.7
90-100	19	54.3

Table 2. Significant Intervention Attitudes.

	Respondents	Groups * 1	2	3	4	Chi-square	p > .05
Case 1							
4. The father could be helped by court-ordered mental health counseling	35	9.94	23.67	25.06	12.75	14.681	.002
5. The father is a mentally disturbed person, not a criminal	34	8.83	27.06	19.63	14.38	16.256	.001
7. The father should serve a jail sentence	32	22.61	11.07	11.56	19.31	9.099	.028
Case 2							
4. The father could be helped by court-ordered mental health counseling	32	8.00	20.06	25.06	12.87	15.582	.001
6. The father is a mentally disturbed person, not a criminal	34	8.94	25.61	22.06	11.81	16.379	.001
9. The mother should be arrested	35	26.17	10.83	12.83	22.69	14.081	.003
10. Court-ordered mental health therapy can help this family	34	8.83	18.72	24.75	18.65	11.295	.010
Case 3							
4. The father could be helped by court-ordered mental health counseling	33	8.00	21.89	25.17	10.19	18.756	.000
5. If the father is removed from the home, the daughter should stay with the mother with mental health therapy	35	9.39	23.22	23.22	15.94	11.355	.010
6. The father is a mentally disturbed person, not a criminal	34	9.78	25.78	21.56	12.81	14.735	.002
9. The mother should be arrested	34	26.62	14.22	11.17	19.19	11.562	.009
Case 4							
1. The family can be helped by mental health therapy without court intervention	35	8.94	22.28	26.44	13.88	16.006	.001
4. The father could be helped by court-ordered mental health counseling	35	6.83	24.44	25.83	14.50	20.441	.000
6. The father is a mentally disturbed person, not a criminal	35	12.72	24.22	23.28	11.00	11.827	.008
7. The father should serve a jail sentence	34	21.94	9.83	14.06	24.56	12.104	.007
9. The mother should be arrested	35	24.11	14.67	11.89	21.75	8.426	.038

* 1 = sheriff; 2 = counselor; 3 = child protective services; 4 = police.